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SAPPHO AND THE "LEUCADIAN LEAP"

ONE of the most important archaeological discoveries of recent years is that of the so-called "underground basilica" just outside the Porta Maggiore in Rome. In April, 1917, a large room was found, fifty feet beneath the Naples railroad line, with nave and side aisles of exactly the form of an early Christian basilica. It dates from the first century A.D. and was evidently a pagan place of worship.

Sufficient details have already been published¹ to make us familiar with the more important features. The present article is an attempt to explain one of the stucco reliefs with which the walls are covered. The relief in question (Fig. 1) occupies the half-dome of the semi-circular apse. It is described by Fornari (*Not. Scav.* 1918, pp. 41 ff.) but by way of explanation he merely suggests that it might represent the voyage of the soul towards the Islands of the Blessed. Cumont (*R. Arch.* 1918, pp. 65 ff.) elaborates this theory more at length. It is quite possible, as he thinks, that the relief may have had some special cult significance to the votaries who frequented the place, but it appears probable that the original intention of the artist was to represent a well-known story, namely the famous "Leucadian Leap" of Sappho in her attempt to be freed from her hopeless love for Phaon.

Let us first examine the relief in detail. On the right (Fig. 1) is a rocky cliff from the top of which steps out into space a female figure. She wears a closely fitting garment, and holds in addition in her upraised right hand one edge of a large mantle which covers the back of her head and swells out in fluttering folds. In her left hand she holds one handle of a lyre. Behind her on a higher eminence stands Eros and seems gently to assist her to make the leap. Beneath is the sea, represented realistically with agitated waves. Half emerging from the water is a Triton with

¹ *Chron. B. A.* IV, 1917, p. 41; *London Times, Lit. Suppl.* Nov. 15, 1917, p. 555 (Mrs. Strong); *Year's Work in Class. Studies*, 1917, pp. 6 ff. (Van Buren); *Not. Scav.* 1918, pp. 30 ff. (Gatti and Fornari); *R. Arch.* 1918, pp. 52 ff. (Cumont); *A.J.A.* XXII, 1918, p. 79, XXIII, 1919, pp. 82, 429.

scaly body holding in his outstretched arms a large garment, as if to break the fall. To the left amidst the waves another Triton with legs terminating in serpent coils holds in one hand an oar and in the other a trumpet on which he blows. On a rock between the two Tritons may have been some other object, but it cannot now be distinguished. High up on the left is another cliff on which stands Apollo, apparently nude, holding his bow in his lowered left hand, and some object, possibly a torch, in his extended right. On a lower level to the extreme left sits a man with the upper part of his body wrapped in a short cloak. He leans forward and rests his head pensively, or regretfully, or sadly, as the case may be, on one upraised hand.

An explanation which fits nearly every detail of this scene is found in Ovid's XVth *Heroïd*, the letter from Sappho to Phaon.¹ Commencing at line 157, Sappho tells how she was reposing sadly beside a spring and was addressed by a Naiad as follows: (vs. 163 text of Palmer)

- 'quoniam non ignibus aequis*
Ureris, Ambracia est terra petenda tibi.
- 165 *Phoebus ab excelso, quantum patet, aspicit aequor*
—Actiacum populi Leucadiumque vocant:—
Hinc se Deucalion Pyrrhae succensus amore
Misit et inlaeso corpore pressit aquas;
Nec mora, versus amor fugit lentissima mersi
- 170 *Pectora; Deucalion igne levatus erat.*
Hanc legem locus ille tenet. pete protinus altam
Leucada nec saxo desiluisse time!
Ut monuit, cum voce abiit; ego territa surgo,
Nec lacrimas oculi continuere mei.
- 175 *Ibimus, o nymphe, monstrataque saxa petemus:*
Sit procul insano victus amore timor!
Quidquid erit, melius quam nunc erit: aura, subito:
Et mea non magnum corpora pondus habent.
Tu quoque, mollis Amor, pennas suppone cadenti,
- 180 *Ne sim Leucadiae mortua crimen aquae!*
Inde chelyn Phoebo, communia munera, ponam,
Et sub ea versus unus et alter erunt;

¹ All of the more recent writers concur in considering this epistle to be really by Ovid in spite of the fact that it does not occur in all of the manuscripts. See Palmer and Purser, *Ovidi Heroïdes* (Oxford 1898), pp. 420 ff.; von Wilamowitz-Moellendorff, *Sappho und Simonides* (Berlin, 1913), p. 21, note 2.



FIGURE 1.—STUCCO RELIEF IN THE "UNDERGROUND BASILICA," ROME.

*'Grata lyram posui tibi, Pheobe, poetria Sappho:
Convenit illa mihi, convenit illa tibi!'*

With this passage in mind no further description of the relief is needed. The woman stepping from the cliff is Sappho, rep-

resented here as elsewhere¹ as holding her poet's lyre. Eros stands at her side to lend his support, and Apollo, to whom the lyre is to be dedicated, stands on the opposite height and stretches out his hand protectingly. Another kindly divinity is also introduced, the Triton holding out the robe to break the fall. To make the story complete, even an absent character is included and we see the figure of the unresponsive Phaon seated pensively at one side. Many of these details are not clear in the photograph. When one studies the original the impression of an actual leap into space is even more marked, and it seems certain that such was the intention the artist wished to convey.

For the purpose of explaining the relief there is no need to go into the question of the historical and much maligned Sappho. Doubtless those who have extolled her virtues in recent years² are quite right in their statements. At the time of Ovid, however, the story as given above was in vogue, in fact it was common property among writers for several centuries before his time. Strabo³ is our authority for the fact that Menander followed the same tradition, in fact he states that according to Menander, Sappho was the first to take the leap. Turpilius in his *Leucadia* probably followed closely the story as told by Menander, although the few remaining fragments⁴ reveal only faintly the background of the myth as given by Ovid. The original source for these writers was a story which was treated both in Alexandrian literature and in the New Comedy. For our purpose it is enough to know that at the time when the relief was executed the story of Sappho, as given by Ovid, was well known.

For our purpose also it is not necessary to seek out the history of the famous "Leucadian Leap." The Leucadian Cliff is a steep limestone rock situated on the end of Cape Doukato, a promontory five miles long at the south-west end of the island of Leucas. Here still remain traces of a once important temple of Apollo,

¹ Comparetti, 'Saffo nelle antiche rappresentanze vascolari,' *Museo Italiano di Ant. Class.* II, 1888, pp. 40 ff.

² H. T. Wharton, *Sappho* (London-Chicago 1908); von Wilamowitz-Moellendorf, *Sappho und Simonides* (Berlin 1913); William K. Prentice, *Class. Phil.* 1918, pp. 347 ff.

³ Strabo, X, ii, 9; Kock, *Comicorum Atticorum Fragmenta*, III, p. 89.

⁴ Ribbeck, *Comicorum Romanorum Fragmenta*, 2nd ed., pp. 97 ff. In one fragment of Turpilius (Ribbeck, p. 100) there is a reference to Neptune as well as Apollo. Had we the entire comedy before us it might be possible to trace through this a reason for the presence of the Tritons in the relief.

and here in early times was performed¹ an expiatory rite in honor of the god in which a criminal was covered with feathers in an attempt to break his fall, and was then thrown from the cliff. In the course of time arose the superstition that if anyone tormented by love should hurl himself from the cliff, he would find relief from his woes without necessarily losing his life in the adventure. This belief may have been derived in some way from the earlier religious rite, or it may have been an independent superstition, but at any rate at the time of the execution of our relief it was commonly accepted, and may well have furnished a subject for an artist of the time.²

In early art, representations of either Sappho or Phaon are rare and generally limited to isolated figures of one or the other.³ Nothing to parallel the present scene has been found, a fact which furnishes additional proof that the story as here depicted is a late development.

An additional confirmation of our interpretation of the relief is found on a coin of Trajan from Nicopolis, published first by Friedländer.⁴ As pointed out later by Imhoof-Blumer⁵ the representation of the coin on plate 23 of Friedländer's publication is inaccurate. What one really finds is a figure of Apollo standing erect in exactly the attitude of the "basilica" relief, with the right hand outstretched holding a torch, and with the left hand at his side holding the bow. Of still more importance is the inscription: 'Απόλλων Λευκάτης. Both the coin and the relief evidently have reference to the cult statue of Apollo in the temple on the cliff of Leucas, and the localizing of the scene represented on the relief leaves no doubt concerning the subject to which it refers.

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¹ See Frazer, *The Scapegoat* (London 1913), p. 254; A. B. Cook, *Zeus*, I, pp. 344 ff.

² Hephaestion (Ptol. Hephaest. *ap. Phot. Bibl. cod.* 190, p. 153, ed. Im. Bekker) gives a list of some who took the leap but does not include the name of Sappho. Margaret Heinemann (*Landschaftliche Elemente in der griech. Kunst*, pp. 48 f.) thinks a painting in the *Tomba della caccia e pesca* at Corneto (*Mon. Inst.* XII, pl. 14 a; Dennis, I, p. 311) a representation of this leap. Dennis (*loc. cit.*) and von Wilamowitz (*Sappho und Simonides*, p. 26, note 1) describe the painting correctly as a simple representation of bathing and diving.

³ Comparetti, *op. cit.*; Roscher, *Lex. s. v.* 'Phaon.'

⁴ *Arch. Zeit.* 1869, p. 103, pl. 23, No. 21.

⁵ Imhoof-Blumer, *Monnaies Grecques*, p. 141.